

Burning Down The Hall: Castaneda's Critics versus Other Ways Of Knowing

Alan Steinfeld

This is a response to the Reality Sandwich article by ST Frequency, "Shamans and Charlatans: Assessing Castaneda's Legacy." This writing was particularly initiated by this peculiar pronouncement of ST: ". . . *the halls of academia are tarnished with the elevation of charlatans.*" It appears that ST has perhaps only read Carlos Castaneda's first book and more closely the books of the critic and researcher Richard De Mille, *The Don Juan Papers* and *Castaneda's Journey*.

I am a staunch upholder of the Castaneda legend that begins with a young anthropology student from UCLA who goes to the Arizona desert to document the uses of psycho-active plants by the Native Americans of the southwest. During his early research in the field, Castaneda discovered his teacher, the mysterious don Juan Matus. In a secluded bus station in a Mexican border town, probably Nogales, he awkwardly introduces himself to the strange old Indian. As their eyes meet, Castaneda suddenly finds himself captivated. He writes: "It was a formidable look . . . It was a look that went through me. I became tongue tied and could not continue with the harangue about myself". [i] Here and throughout the 12-book narrative, Castaneda portrays himself as a heavy-handed fool who continuously challenges Don Juan to explain his definitions and motives. This device helps to invite the readers to look at their own narrow opinions about what is possible.

Other Ways of Knowing

ST Frequency writes: *By accepting such questionable documents as authenticated knowledge, the truth about indigenous peoples becomes diluted with misinformation and (perhaps more lamentable) the halls of academia are tarnished with the elevation of charlatans to pedestals of high esteem.*

How many real shamans have passed through those tarnished halls? I would say very few. Shamans and in this case sorcerers do not communicate in a paradigm that is limited to the linear level of academic understanding. The predicament that ST and De Mille are in is one that Castaneda himself had to overcome in the early years of his apprenticeship. In the second book, *A Separate Reality*, Don Juan tells Castaneda: "Your problem is that you want to understand everything, and that is not possible. If you insist on understanding you're not considering your entire life as a human being. Your stumbling block is intact...you are chained to reason." [ii] In "academia" there is no room for other ways of knowing. The Western tradition of learning says we can only know with our minds--thus we have been robbed of our bodies. Fortunately for Castaneda, he discovered that other ways of knowing were possible. For instance, he is coached by one of Don Juan's cohorts to know "that human beings have a superb center of perception on the outside of the calves, and that if the skin in that area could be made to relax . . . the scope of perception would be enhanced in ways that would be impossible to fathom rationally." [iii]

In a careful reading of the Castaneda work, from 1968 to 1998, we see his continued extrication from the culture of education that formed his (and our) original worldview. In *The Active Side of Infinity* (1999), which was his last book (not *Magical Passes* of 1998 as stated by ST), Castaneda acknowledges his hard-fought effort. He dedicates this final volume to his original anthropology professors at UCLA: "I plugged into a field situation

from which I never emerged . . . a greater force . . . called infinity swallowed me before I could formulate clear-cut social scientist's propositions." [iv]

Throughout the course of his oeuvre, Castaneda elucidates techniques and applications which, if followed correctly, will produce mind blowing (and I don't mean drug-induced) results to change your life: "Dreaming," "seeing," "stalking," "re-capitulation," "controlled folly," and "stopping the world" are all designed to drop below the mask of our personality structure and access deeper ways of knowing the world and ourselves. Anyone who makes it beyond the first two books learns that the real objective of Don Juan's work was much more than to teach the young naïve Castaneda about the use of peyote and other entheogens. In his 3rd book, *Journey to Ixlan* (1972) Castaneda goes back to his earlier notes and re-evaluates everything he had learned up until that point. He realizes that Don Juan gave him those mind-altering plants specifically to break him out of his academic habit of intellectualization. In the forward to his 8th book, *The Power of Silence* (1987), Castaneda writes: "It takes years of training to teach us to deal intelligently with the world of everyday life. Our schooling is rigorous, because the knowledge we are trying to impart is very complex. The same criteria apply to the sorcerer's world: their schooling, which relies on oral instruction and the manipulation of awareness, although different from ours is just as rigorous, because their knowledge is as, or perhaps more complex." [v]

The Yaqui Question

Another way that ST and DeMille try to discredit Castaneda is by questioning the subtitle of the first book: *A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. ST writes: *Castaneda maintains that it was added per suggestion of the University Press who, prior to reading his manuscript, insisted on its inclusion to help categorize the book. To imply that Don Juan is representative of all Yaquis, he says, was never his intention. This admission stands in stark contrast to a comment made by the associate editor of the University Press who, in a letter to De Mille, states, "The title of Castaneda's book and the entire text are the work of the author". . . It seems then that Castaneda himself erroneously labeled his work as an exposition of a "Yaqui way of knowledge," and purposely so - but for what reason?*

In 1968 when his first book was published, Castaneda was unaware of Don Juan's true lineage. It is only later that he corrected himself by diving deeper into the sorcerer's world. In 1972 he writes: "I have made no attempts to place Don Juan in a cultural milieu. The fact that he considers himself to be a Yaqui Indian does not mean that his knowledge of sorcery is known or practiced by the Yaqui Indians in general." [vi] Don Juan is Yaqui, but his teaching is from a much older tradition. It is like being Jewish but practicing Buddhism. In the books from the 1980s, Castaneda is informed that Don Juan's lineage is not Yaqui at all but Toltec. Castaneda explains that for Don Juan, Toltec was not a culture, but "a man of knowledge." [vii] Don Juan could trace this particular lineage back centuries, or even for a millennium before the Spanish Conquest. [viii]

ST also states: *Furthermore, the knowledge of witchcraft is thought by the Yaquis to be "an inborn quality," a power that cannot be taught or inherited. This statement directly contradicts Castaneda's accounts of the art of Yaqui sorcery as a cycle of apprenticeship handed down across generations from a "benefactor" to his "chosen man."*

In the Toltec tradition, knowledge that was handed down was not based on inheritance. The Toltec leader of each generation (Don Juan and Carlos Castaneda) called "the

Nagual" passed the teachings onto those that he sensed had a certain formation of energy in their bodies. Many of the Naguals in Don Juan's lineage were not even Native Americans. The Nagual Luhan was from China, but he had the right energetic configuration to be the inheritor of this grand tradition. This hopefully answers ST's concerns that *"The nature of sorcery as practiced by Don Juan . . . differs strikingly from that traditionally understood to exist in Yaqui society"* and that there is a *"conspicuous absence of Yaqui terminology in Don Juan's teachings."* The Toltec wisdom is more aligned to the mystery schools of the West, where the student would undergo certain initiation practices in order to evolve his spiritual knowledge.

Sorcerer or Seers?

In book 7, *The Fire from Within* (1984), Castaneda realizes the ultimate goal of the teachings. He says that Don Juan and his fellow teachers *"were not teaching me sorcery, but how to master three aspects of the ancient knowledge they possessed: awareness, stalking, and intent, and they were not sorcerers; they were seers."* [ix] One of the special talents of seers, according to Don Juan, is that they are able to see man as a field of energy which looks like a luminous egg.

This leads to another point that ST tries to make by quoting the anthropologist Muriel Thayer Painter. *"Painter . . . notes that, according to Yaqui belief, those persons that practice witchcraft (i.e., sorcery) are timorous and feeble."* Can any serious researcher really believe such a superstitious description of cultural knowledge? Painter goes on to say that: *"both traits are utterly incongruous with Don Juan's depiction as a man who has 'vanquished fear' and is 'remarkably fit,' despite his advanced age."*

This point is addressed in the introduction to *The Power of Silence*. Castaneda states, "at various times DJ attempted to name his knowledge for my benefit. He felt the most appropriate name was nagualism, but that the term was too obscure. Calling it simply 'knowledge' made it too vague, and to call it 'witchcraft' was debasing. 'The mastery of intent' was too abstract and 'the search for total freedom' too long and metaphorical. Finally, because he was unable to find a more appropriate name, he called it 'sorcery,' though he admitted it was not really accurate." [x]

Almost until the end, Castaneda refrained from calling Don Juan's teachings "shamanism." For Castaneda the anthropologist, this term referred to "a belief system . . . that maintained that an unseen world of ancestral forces, good and evil, is pervasive around us." [xi] This was far too simple a definition for the sophisticated unfolding of Don Juan's work, which maintained the existence of a multiplicity of realities. For instance, Don Juan saw the world not just as the solidity of material forms he called the tonal, but as a world of energy, which he labeled the nagual. We might say that the nagual worldview is more right-brained as opposed to the linear left-brained understanding. We are culturally conditioned to see only the latter view. It was only in the late work, when shamanism was more broadly understood, that Castaneda referred to Don Juan a shaman. Many scholars throughout the course of Castaneda's rise to fame have claimed that the work was one of forgery and plagiarism from other anthropological studies of Native American culture. However, it seems that no one has ever been able to place the exact source of the terminology of many of Castaneda's unique concepts. Such phrases as "inorganic beings," "allies," "the movement of the assemblage point," and "petty tyrants" do not appear to have any anthropological antecedents.

Don Juan tells Castaneda that "the definitive journey" is the ultimate task of the seers of his lineage. This means that: "They are warriors of total freedom, that they are such masters of awareness, stalking, and intent that they are not caught by death like the rest of mortal men, but choose the moment and the way of their departure from this world. At that moment they are consumed by a fire from within and vanish from the face of the earth, free, as if they had never existed." [xii]

There is nothing like a little "fire from within" to not just tarnish but to burn down the halls of academia. In book 6, *The Eagles' Gift* (1981), Castaneda witnesses such an event as Don Juan and his warrior party ascend to heaven. Describing the action as a string of lights in the sky, he's reminded of the plumed serpent, Quetzalcoatl, of the Toltec legend. [xiii]

ST quotes a New York Times article from July 23, 1970 which "*describes the plight of Oaxacan Indians suffering from the flood of American 'mushroom addicts' and the subsequent crackdown by Mexican authorities; once considered a 'great medicine,' the fungi are now contraband in Oaxaca.*"

This is mostly likely due to the fact that the so-called seekers went looking for enlightenment in the entheogens of Mexico because they had found only bland reasons for living in their institutions of higher learning. Castaneda gave people hope in the authenticity and magic of being. The world he described was not one fabricated on academic concepts but based on experience.

ST also writes: "*New Age 'shamans' modeled on Castaneda's sorcerer exist in abundance in today's society While some operations offer legitimate and conscientious experiences of traditional shamanism, others are little more than opportunistic scams.*"

Who might these pseudo shamans be? Perhaps they are people giving others a real opportunity to have the experience of Native American perceptions as opposed to reading about it in the journals of academia.

In addition ST wrote: "*Carlos Castaneda re-emerged in the public eye in the early nineties espousing the virtues of a meditation technique he named Tensegrity, after a term coined by R. Buckminster Fuller.*"

Castaneda did not "re-emerge" in the 1990s. He was writing detailed accounts of his own integration into the sorcerer's world all through the 1970s and 1980s. In *Tales of Power* (1974), he concludes his formal training with Don Juan with the inconceivable act of jumping off a high mountain plateau and shifting his energy to live to write about it. *The Second Ring of Power* (1977) describes Castaneda's confrontation with female sorcerers. *The Art of Dreaming* (1993) sums up the steps of lucid dreaming outlined in his previous books. In general, the Castaneda canon was an ongoing narrative of adventures into other realms of existence. The works of his sorcery associates Florinda Donner (*Being and Dreaming*) and Taisha Abelar (*The Sorcerer's Crossing*) matched perfectly Castaneda's teachings of dreaming, stalking, and intent.

But what became of the legend? If we read Amy Wallace's post-mortem epilogue to the Castaneda phenomenon, *Sorcery's Apprentice: My Life with Carlos Castaneda*, [xiv] we can see how the great master lost his way. Throughout his years of instruction Don Juan would always emphasize that the key to true knowledge was impeccability, what the *Tao Te Ching* calls virtue. According to Don Juan, a lack of ruthless impeccability leads to *self-importance*, which he explained was really *self-pity*. It is this condition of the mind

that eventually kills most people. This why a true warrior learns to "stalk" himself. Wallace's account of Castaneda's inner circle shows a calculating man using the power of his sorcery to control and manipulate his students, to whom he had hoped to pass his knowledge. He ultimately failed the final task of a warrior: "the definitive journey" - to leave the world as Don Juan did as a luminous being. Castaneda let the self-importance of absolute power corrupt him absolutely. Although it seems that there is no heir apparent to continue the Nagual line, Castaneda left an indelible path for others to follow. His books, which Don Juan urged him to write, contain formulas by which, if taken seriously, anyone might become a warrior of total freedom.

Conclusion

From the very beginning of Castaneda's career, people have attempted to smother the enthusiasm for the mystery of life that these books have brought. Robert Marshall, in *The Dark Legacy of Carlos Castaneda*, writes, "*in spite of the exhaustive debunking, the Carlos Castaneda books still sell well. The University of California Press, which published Castaneda's first book, steadily sells 7,500 copies a year. BookScan, a Nielsen company that tracks book sales, reports that three of Castaneda's most popular titles sold a total of 10,000 copies in 2006. None of Castaneda's titles have ever gone out of print -- an impressive achievement for any author. Today, Simon and Schuster, Castaneda's main publisher, still classifies his books as nonfiction*". [xv]

Overall Castaneda's books are a concentrated, consistent and comprehensive study of a particular worldview. It is a perspective of non-linear reality that most of us skeptical of anything other than Western thought refuse to take the first step to explore. DeMille, perhaps Frequency, and other debunkers fail to see the spiritual movement emerging in this country. They are cynics who, as Oscar Wilde said, "know the price of everything and the value of nothing."

Perhaps Castaneda's critics will one day emerge from the ivory towers of their educational institutions to smell the roses and realize that their sweet fragrance is more than a list of chemical components. As Castaneda learned in the rules for "stalking": "For a warrior there is no end to the mystery of being, whether being means being a pebble, or an ant or oneself. That is a warrior's humbleness. One is equal to everything." [xvi]

Alan Steinfeld is the founder of <http://www.newrealities.com> a portal; of holistic activity in New York dedicated to mind, body, and soul awareness. He can be reached at newrealities@earthlink.net

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Notes:

[i] Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* (Simon and Schuster, 1972) 18

[ii] Carlos Castaneda, *A Separate Reality* (Simon and Schuster, 1971) 310-312

[iii] Carlos Castaneda, *The Eagle's Gift* (Simon and Schuster, 1981), 257.

[iv] Carlos Castaneda, *The Active Side of Infinity*, (HarperCollins book, 1999) Dedication, page v,

[v] Carlos Castaneda, *The Power of Silence: Further Lessons of don Juan* (Simon and Schuster, 1987) page 7.

[vi] Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* (Simon and Schuster, 1972) page 8.

[vii] Carlos Castaneda, *The Fire from Within* (Simon and Schuster, 1984) page 18.

[viii] Carlos Castaneda, *The Fire from Within* (Simon and Schuster, 1984) page 18.

- [ix] Carlos Castaneda, *The Fire from Within* (Simon and Schuster, 1984) page 10.
- [x] Carlos Castaneda, *The Power of Silence: Further Lessons of don Juan* (Simon and Schuster, 1987) page 9
- [xi] Carlos Castaneda, *The Art of Dreaming* (HarperCollins book, 1993) p. vii-viii
- [xii] Carlos Castaneda, *The Fire from Within* (Simon and Schuster, 1984) page 13.
- [xiii] Carlos Castaneda, *The Eagle's Gift* (Simon and Schuster, 1981), p316
- [xiv] Amy Wallace, North Atlantic Book company, 2003
- [xv] Robert Marshall, *The Dark Legacy of Carlos Castaneda*, April 12, 2007 for salon.com <http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2007/04/12/castaneda/>
- [xvi] Carlos Castaneda, *The Eagle's Gift* (Simon and Schuster, 1981), 281-282